

# Did Pre-Gospel Christians Believe Judas Betrayed Jesus?<sup>1</sup>

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*In the period when the Gospels were being written, rival traditions existed about Judas, a negative image in the communities where the canonical Gospels originated, and a positive image within some other communities such as Paul's circle, the Q community and the proponents of the Gospel of Peter. Given the priority of Paul and Q, and the ambiguity as to motive in Mark, this evidence strongly suggests to me that Judas did not originally have a negative reputation, and the hostility towards him was a subsequent development.*

As one moves through the Gospels in the order of creation (Mark, Matthew, Luke and John) the image of Judas Iscariot, the alleged betrayer of Jesus, becomes increasingly negative. In Mark, no motive is given for why Judas went to see the chief priests.<sup>2</sup> Although the priests offer Judas money it appears to be an afterthought, the offer coming only after Judas agreed to aid the priests. In Matthew, who used Mark as a source, Judas specifically asks for a reward in return for helping the priests.<sup>3</sup> In Luke, who also used Mark as a source, we are told that Satan entered into Judas and that led him to go to the priests.<sup>4</sup> Luke, however, is a little vague about who raised the issue of money, although money enters into the decision to aid the priests. In John, not only does Satan enter into Judas<sup>5</sup> we are also told that Judas was a thief who stole from the Apostles.<sup>6</sup> However, John makes no specific mention of Judas getting any money from the priests.

Despite this march of hostility towards Judas (and the Jews) there is some evidence that among the earliest Christians Judas did not have a negative reputation and was not seen as an evil figure. In this paper I want to look at a few text sources that suggest that among the pre-Gospel Christians Judas was seen as an Apostle in good standing after the death of Jesus. These include Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, a passage from Q, and a verse from the Gospel of Peter. I will examine all of these below.

First, however, we need to look at the nature of the Greek word used by the Gospels to indicate that Judas "betrayed" Jesus. That word is *paradidomi*. Its primary meaning is "to give or hand over to another."<sup>7</sup> The word appears in the New Testament just over 120 times, 44 of those occasions in connection with Judas.<sup>8</sup> When not used in connection with Judas, the term is normally translated in some form connected to its primary meaning of "hand

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical citations are to the NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 14:10. After Judas goes to the priests he is offered money, but he doesn't bring up the subject. The priests do, after Mark already agreed to work with them.

<sup>3</sup> Matt 24:14-16.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 22:3-5. Luke mentions an agreement with the priests to pay money but doesn't say who brought up the subject.

<sup>5</sup> John 13:27.

<sup>6</sup> John 12:6.

<sup>7</sup> Liddell and Scott, s.v. "paradidomi." See also Strong's Enhanced Concordance, s.v., G3860.

<sup>8</sup> William Klassen, *Judas: Betrayer or friend of Jesus?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 51.

over.” When the word is translated in connection with Judas, it is always rendered as “betray.” It is generally accepted among scholars that “betray” is a proper secondary meaning of *paradidomi* and it is not hard to see how, in a sarcastic manner, the word can take on the more negative connotation of “betrayal.” But there is some question as to whether this word had that negative sense prior to its Gospel usage.

William Klassen, a New Testament scholar who has attempted to rehabilitate Judas’ reputation, has argued that there is no evidence that *paradidomi* ever had the meaning of “betray” or “treachery” in the first century and that no such usage is known prior to the writing of the Gospels.<sup>9</sup> His analysis includes a review of the entry in Liddell and Scott’s Lexicon, a primary reference tool in Greek word studies. Although the Lexicon gives “betray” as a secondary usage and gives examples in classical literature for such usage, Klassen examines those citations and argues that those usages have no connection to the concept of “betray” or “treachery.”<sup>10</sup> He also notes the existence in first century literature of perfectly good Greek words for “betrayal,” *prodidomi* and *prodosia*, and another good Greek word, *prodotes*, for “traitor” and gives examples.<sup>11</sup> If Klassen is correct, then Judas was initially known as the one who “handed over” Jesus rather than the one who “betrayed” Jesus. This would require us to have some sort of scenario in which Judas would have been involved in handing over Jesus to the Jewish authorities without it initially being seen as a betrayal. I will address that issue after reviewing the textual evidence referred to above.

Our earliest references to the character of Judas appear to be in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Although he doesn’t mention Judas by name he has two separate passages, 1 Cor 11:23 and 1 Cor 15:5, describing two separate events that both appear to refer to the character of Judas. Scholars date Paul’s first letter to the members of the Corinthian church to about 56 C.E.,<sup>12</sup> which would be about 10 to 20 years before the writing of the Gospel of Mark and 20 to 30 years after the death of Jesus.

The letter suggests that not all Christians accepted Paul’s claim to being an apostle and Paul defends his right to be called an apostle.<sup>13</sup> We should also note, as evidenced in his letter to the Galatians in which he criticizes Peter, that Paul has no hesitation in calling out other Apostles for hypocrisy or failings.<sup>14</sup> So, if Judas were a betrayer of Jesus, one would expect that Paul would have no hesitation in pointing out Judas’s traitorous act, especially in a letter defending his own claim to an apostolic title. So what does he have to say in First Corinthians?

The first implicit reference to Judas occurs at 1 Cor 11:23. Paul writes, in part, “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus *on the night when he was betrayed* took a loaf of bread (emphasis added.)” Although Judas isn’t mentioned by name, the context of Paul’s remark is obviously the incident involving the actions of Judas as later described in the Gospels. The Greek word translated here as “betrayed” is *paradedeto*, a verb form of *paradidomi*. Technically, then, the sentence should be translated as “on the night when he was *handed over*” and then there should be a debate as to whether the word has the primary meaning of “hand over” or a possible secondary meaning of “betrayed.” This is Paul’s only apparent use of the word in all of his letters. Since the Gospel usage is later in time, and if, as Klassen argues, there is no earlier indication that *paradidomi* had the secondary sarcastic meaning, we cannot logically argue that the later usage should determine how to translate the earlier usage by Paul unless an earlier example of the secondary meaning in Greek usage is available.

Now, it may be true that Paul had that secondary sense in mind but we don’t know from this passage alone that he did have that view. We also have no reference point in Paul’s other writings indicating that he had a negative

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<sup>9</sup> Klassen, 48.

<sup>10</sup> Klassen, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Klassen, 49. See also Liddell and Scott, s.v., “prodidomi,” “prodosis,” and “prodotos.”

<sup>12</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: ARBL/Doubleday, 12996), 511.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Cor 9.

<sup>14</sup> Gal 2:11-14.

understanding of Judas's actions or that he meant to use the Gospel sense as opposed to the primary meaning. In fact, it is quite remarkable that Paul actually omits Judas's name in referencing the action. Why didn't he say "handed over or betrayed" *by Judas*? If Judas were so closely associated with betraying Jesus one would expect the name and the act to be casually linked together. The absence of Judas's name at least raises a question as to whether Paul thought Judas committed a hostile act towards Jesus.

This brings us to Paul's second passage that possibly evokes the character of Judas. In 1 Cor 15:5 Paul says that Jesus made a post-crucifixion appearance first to Cephas (i.e., Peter<sup>15</sup>) and then to "the Twelve", a reference to the twelve disciples as a group. While Judas isn't identified by name here, it is obvious that Paul is speaking of the original twelve disciples and not the later group of twelve that, according to the author of Acts, had added Matthias following the death of Judas.<sup>16</sup> None of the Gospels report a post-Crucifixion appearance of Jesus to Judas. In Matthew, Judas dies before the resurrection.<sup>17</sup> Luke specifically excludes Judas from the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

Paul's indication of an appearance by Jesus to the "Twelve" contradicts both Matthew and Luke and strongly suggests that Judas had a good reputation after the crucifixion, at least until the time that Paul wrote this letter. Scholars have attempted to get around this problem by arguing that Paul used the term "the Twelve" in an institutional sense, referring to the Apostles as a collective entity, without regard to the absence of any members. The idea is that "the Twelve" was a nickname for the collective group of Apostles. In support of this viewpoint the scholars attempt to reconcile Paul's usage with the above-cited passage from Luke, who has an appearance only to the eleven disciples other than Judas.

There are several problems with this argument against the idea that Paul's usage of "the Twelve" included Judas. First, it goes against what would be the expected understanding and plain meaning of "the Twelve." Second, this is the only time Paul uses this term in all of his writing, so we have no context within Paul's writings for assuming he had any understanding of "the Twelve" other than its plain meaning. Third, this is the only usage of "the Twelve" in the New Testament prior to the Gospels, so we have no other reference point, contemporary with or prior to Paul's usage, to guide us in understanding how Paul would have understood this term. Fourth, there is no evidence that any New Testament author used the term "the Twelve" in any understanding that didn't include all twelve disciples. (Acts 6:2 refers to "the Twelve" in a post-crucifixion setting but it still refers to a full complement of twelve disciples, with Matthias having replaced Judas.) Fifth, if Paul had a negative image of Judas, and having already referred earlier in the letter to the night Jesus was "handed over," one would expect him to be especially cautious about any terminology that would present Judas in a positive light. Given the importance Paul places on the sequence of appearances as a justification for his own status as an Apostle, even if he meant "the Twelve" in an institutional sense, he would be expected to clarify the term by excluding Judas if he thought he had betrayed Jesus.

While it is possible that Paul meant to use *paradidomi* in a negative sense and "the Twelve" in an institutional sense, we have no clear evidence that this is the case. If we give the words their plain meaning, however, as the addressees of the letter would probably have understood them, we have some evidence of a far less hostile view of Judas than present in the Gospel.

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<sup>15</sup> Paul refers to the disciple Peter as Cephas because that is actually the name by which the disciple was originally known. "Peter" derives from the Greek translation of the Aramaic word "cephas." The confusion comes from Matt 16:18, where Jesus gives the disciple Simon a nickname meaning "rock" and then says, "upon this rock I will build this church." Jesus spoke Aramaic and would have used the Aramaic word for "rock", which is cephas. Matthew, however, wrote in Greek and uses the Greek word for rock, petros.

<sup>16</sup> Acts 1:26.

<sup>17</sup> Matt 27:5.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 24:8, 36.

Another early source of interest is Q, which, by definition, precedes Matthew and Luke, and which may have been written before Mark. Matt 19:28 and Luke 22:29-30 form a linked Q pair, but there is a subtle variation in how the two preserve the passage. Let's look at both versions of the text.

*"Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." (Matt 19:28, emphasis added.)*

*"and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." (Luke 22:29-30, emphasis added.)*

Note that in Matthew, Jesus promises "twelve" thrones to the disciples so that they will rule over the twelve tribes of Israel. In Luke's version, the word "twelve" is missing. He doesn't say how many thrones were promised to the twelve disciples, although he envisions rulers over the twelve tribes of Israel. Luke allows for someone other than Judas to sit on a twelfth throne.

If Matthew represents the original version, it would mean that the Q community understood Jesus to be making a direct promise to Judas that in the coming kingdom of God he would sit on one of the twelve thrones and rule over one of the twelve tribes. This seems strikingly inconsistent with the idea that early Christians believed that Judas betrayed Jesus, especially when one considers that from the viewpoint of all four Gospel authors Jesus would have known from the beginning that Judas would betray him. Therefore, Jesus wouldn't have promised a throne to someone he knew would betray him.

Luke, on the other hand, is less generous to Judas. Although the context still suggests that Jesus made a promise to all twelve disciples that they will rule in the coming Kingdom, Luke's version of the promise is ambiguous. By not stating how many thrones there would be, it can be argued that, in Luke, Jesus has not made a direct promise of a specific throne to Judas.

Which version of the promise is more likely to represent the original Q text? That depends on the answer to the following question. Did Q originally specify "twelve" thrones causing Luke to drop the "twelve", making the promise vague with regard to Judas, or did Q originally not mention the number of thrones, causing Matthew to add in the number "twelve," for whatever reason, and create an ambiguity in the relationship between Jesus and Judas?

While either option is theoretically possible, the likelihood that Matthew, who introduced the idea that Judas betrayed Jesus for a monetary reward, would change the Q quote so that it reflected a bad judgment by Jesus such that he would promise a throne to his future betrayer seems far less likely than the alternative, that Luke altered the quote to remove Judas from the equation. What is especially interesting about this Q passage is that the Q source has no Passion account and therefore includes no account of Judas's actions toward Jesus. If Judas had a negative image at the time Q appeared, why would the Q author have added in a promise to Judas that he would inherit one of the twelve thrones?

Q and Paul both suggest an early trajectory in which all twelve of Jesus' chosen Apostles were considered disciples in good standing at the time that these texts were composed. Let me finish up with one final source, the Gospel of Peter.

The Gospel of Peter had been widely circulated in Syria and apparently read as scripture in some churches.<sup>19</sup> During the second century Christians were openly debating its authenticity.<sup>20</sup> At about the end of the second century Bishop Serapion of Antioch barred its use in churches, apparently because it came to be seen as containing heretical claims

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<sup>19</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the grave: A commentary on the Passion Narratives in the four Gospels* (2 vols.) (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 1341.

<sup>20</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, B. D. *Lost Christianities: The battle for scripture and the faiths we never knew* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2003), 15.

about Jesus.<sup>21</sup> Only fragments of this text survive and there is some debate over its date of composition. Most scholars would place it in the early second century.<sup>22</sup> A few, however, have argued that it preceded all four Gospels.<sup>23</sup> We needn't resolve that question here.

Nowhere in the surviving portions of the Gospel of Peter does Judas appear by name, but the author does make an interesting observation about the twelve disciples. In the passage with which we are concerned, the text says that after the death of Jesus,

*But we twelve disciples of the Lord were weeping and sorrowful; and each one, sorrowful because of what had come to pass, departed to his home.*<sup>24</sup>

Unlike Paul's reference to "the Twelve", which, theoretically, might be an institutional reference rather than a description of twelve specific individuals, the Gospel of Peter clearly describes the actions of twelve specific individuals, each of whom was upset by the crucifixion, and each going home to weep. All twelve are placed on an equal footing with regard to their behavior. The context is clear that the author refers to the original twelve disciples and there is not the slightest hint that Judas had a negative reputation. The passage implies that after the death of Jesus Judas remained one of the disciples in good standing with the others.

We should note that the Gospel of Peter is extremely harsh towards the Jewish authorities and accuses the Jews directly of crucifying Jesus.<sup>25</sup> So, we shouldn't expect the author of this Gospel to be especially friendly to someone who betrayed Jesus. Yet, if the author of the Gospel of Peter knew about Judas' reputation for betrayal why would he omit it from the description of the actions of the twelve disciples after the crucifixion? At the very least one would expect him to add a phrase such as "even Judas, who betrayed the Lord." Either he didn't know about the negative reputation of Judas or he didn't believe it because he had other information.

If as some scholars suspect, the Gospel of Peter precedes the Gospel of Mark, then we have three independent pre-Gospel sources—Paul, Q, and the Gospel of Peter—suggesting that Judas did not have a negative reputation for betraying Jesus. If this Gospel dates to the late first or early second century, as most scholars suspect then, we have a long chronological arc encompassing perhaps a century or more after the crucifixion, through a large swath of the Christian community, overlapping the period during which the Gospels were written, in which Judas had not yet been associated with a betrayal of Jesus.

This suggests that in the period when the Gospels were being written, rival traditions existed about Judas, a negative image in the communities where the canonical Gospels originated, and a positive image within some other communities such as Paul's circle, the Q community and the proponents of the Gospel of Peter. Given the priority of Paul and Q, and the ambiguity as to motive in Mark, this evidence strongly suggests to me that Judas did not originally have a negative reputation, and the hostility towards him was a subsequent development.

This thesis leaves open the question of why Judas was associated with the Greek word *paradidomi*, i.e., "to hand over," and why did its meaning among Christians shift from a neutral connotation to a derogatory one. Space prohibits any detailed examination of this issue. So I will briefly summarize the argument I made in my book *The Judas Brief: Who Really Killed Jesus?* (Continuum 2007.)

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<sup>21</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that did not make it into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 20, 32)

<sup>23</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?: Exposing the roots of anti-Semitism in the Gospel story of the death of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 24, 26.

<sup>24</sup> Brown *Death*, 1321.)

<sup>25</sup> Brown *Death*, 1318.

The Gospel of John indicates that the Jewish authorities feared that the popularity of Jesus would lead to a military reaction against the Jewish people.<sup>26</sup> The entrance of Jesus and his entourage into Jerusalem during a crowded holiday festival, possibly in the aftermath of an insurrection led by Barabbas, would have created a volatile situation that could lead to military intervention, riots, and many Jewish deaths. I suggest that the Jewish priests negotiated a three-way deal among Pilate, Jesus and the Jewish authorities and that Judas represented Jesus in the negotiations. The agreement initially held that Jesus would ensure that his followers remain quiet during the holiday by agreeing to be placed under house arrest with the politically influential Jewish priest Annas and that he would be released after the holiday ended.<sup>27</sup> When Herod heard about this arrangement he was furious. He wanted Jesus dead<sup>28</sup> and forced Pilate to execute Jesus by threatening to bring treason charges against the Governor for allowing an unauthorized person to claim kingship.<sup>29</sup> Pilate relented and, despite Jewish pleas to honor the agreement, had Jesus crucified.

Under this scenario, Judas became known as the one who handed over Jesus, and the description attached to him like a Homeric epithet, initially a neutral term, and then, by Gospel times, understood in a negative sarcastic manner.

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<sup>26</sup> John 11:48.

<sup>27</sup> John 18:13, 19-24 indicates that Jesus was placed under house arrest with Annas.

<sup>28</sup> See Luke 13:31.

<sup>29</sup> “From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, ‘If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor (John 19:12).’” I suggest that you should substitute “Herodians “ (who were Jews) for “Jews” in this passage.